

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for facilitating private and secure shipping of packages using the Internet, said method comprising:

accessing a secure shipping system account;

activating the account for shipping;

setting a package delivery time limit;

receiving temporary address codes that are assigned to the account; and

using the temporary address codes to direct the shipping of the packages.

2. A method according to Claim 1 wherein accessing a secure shipping system account further comprises establishing a secure connection to a private and secure shipping provider web site.

3. A method according to Claim 1 wherein activating the account for shipping further comprises:

entering a valid member number;

entering a valid user ID and password;

selecting a category name defining a shipping address for the packages;

and

receiving user account information.

4. A method according to Claim 3 wherein selecting a category name comprises selecting a default category name which defines a default shipping address for a user, while not providing the address of the recipient to the sender of the package.

5. A method according to Claim 1 wherein using the temporary address codes to direct the shipping of the packages further comprises:

connecting to a merchant web site;

selecting at least one item for purchase and shipment;

selecting a private and secure shipping provider logo from a partnered merchant web site;

confirming selected shipping information, which is linked to the temporary address code; and

receiving the package from a carrier.

6. A method according to Claim 1 wherein using the temporary address codes to direct the shipping of the packages further comprises:

connecting to a merchant web site;

selecting at least one item for purchase and shipment;

entering the temporary address code as the shipping address on the merchant payment and shipping form; and

receiving the package from a carrier.

7. A system configured to facilitate private and secure shipping for a user via the Internet comprising:

a central computer comprising:

a private shipping module;

a mail and shipping carrier database module; and

a temporary address codes module;

at least one Internet server coupled to said central computer; and

at least one of an Internet and an intranet server coupled to said central computer, and further coupled to a computer for a mail/shipping carrier, said central computer configured to assign temporary shipping address codes using said temporary address codes module, to an account of a registered user, the temporary shipping address codes sent by said system to a merchant, via the Internet, as shipping instructions for the package or packages.

8. A system according to Claim 7 wherein said temporary address codes module is configured to:

access an address code database to select at least one inactive temporary shipping address code; and

access a customer history database to determine which temporary shipping address codes to allocate for a shipping.

9. A system according to Claim 8 wherein to access a customer history database to determine which temporary shipping address codes to allocate said temporary address code module configures said central computer to:

select a least actively used temporary shipping address code;

determine if the selected temporary shipping address code is currently active for any other users; and

determine if the selected temporary shipping address code has been previously assigned to the user.

10. A system according to Claim 7 wherein said central computer is configured with a scheduler to deactivate temporary shipping address codes once a package delivery time limit has expired.

11. A system according to Claim 7 wherein said mail and shipping carrier database module is configured to identify shipping carriers which are partnered with the private and secure shipping provider.

12. A system according to Claim 7 wherein said central computer further comprises a user identification module configured with at least one of member numbers, user IDs and passwords for registered users.

13. A system according to Claim 7 wherein said central computer is configured to transmit a final destination to a mail/shipping carrier computer from said temporary address code module upon receipt of a query from the carrier computer.

14. A system according to Claim 7 wherein said central computer further comprises an account cross-referencing module configured to:

retrieve user account information and category names from a customer database;

link the temporary shipping address codes received from said temporary address code module to user accounts; and

activate the user account for private shipping.

15. A system according to Claim 7 wherein said central computer system is configured to transmit an identification output file to a user computer, the output file comprising user account information, temporary shipping address codes, and final destination information associated with the address codes.

16. A system according to Claim 7 wherein said central computer is configured with shipping histories for each user.

17. A method for operating a computer to facilitate private and secure shipping, said method comprising:

prompting a user to enter a user ID and a password;

prompting the user to activate private shipping;

retrieving user account information; and

generating at least one temporary shipping address code for use by the user for shipping one or more packages.

18. A method according to Claim 17 wherein generating at least one temporary address code further comprises prompting the user to select one of a default shipping category name or an alternate shipping category name.

19. A method according to Claim 17 further comprising transmitting instructions to activate the temporary shipping address codes.

20. A method according to Claim 17 further comprising transmitting an identification output file to a user computer, the output file comprising at least one of user account information, a temporary shipping address code, and destination information.

21. A method according to Claim 17 wherein the temporary shipping address code is used to identify the recipient.

22. A method according to Claim 17 further comprising transmitting at least one temporary shipping address code to an external computer to direct shipping of a package.

23. A method according to Claim 22 wherein to direct shipping of a package, the external computer accesses a database to match the temporary shipping address code with a final destination for the package.

24. A database comprising:

data corresponding to merchants who are partnered with a private and secure shipping system provider;

data corresponding to temporary address codes;

data corresponding to user accounts;

data corresponding to customer histories; and

data corresponding to user IDs and passwords.

25. A database according to Claim 24 where said data corresponding to customer histories comprises data corresponding to temporary shipping address codes previously assigned to a user for shipping packages.

26. A database according to Claim 24 wherein said data corresponding to user accounts further comprises data corresponding to at least one of a default shipping category name and alternate shipping category names for a user.

27. A database according to Claim 26 wherein said default shipping category name and said alternate shipping category names are configured to identify final shipping destinations.

28. A system to facilitate secure purchasing and shipping via the Internet comprising:

a central computer further comprising:

a digital checkbook module;

a merchant database module;

a temporary card number module;

a private shipping module;

a mail and shipping carrier database module; and

a temporary address codes module;

at least one Internet server coupled to said central computer; and

at least one of an Internet and an intranet server coupled to said central computer, and further coupled to an acquiring bank processor and a computer for a mail/shipping carrier,

said central computer configured to assign temporary debit and credit card numbers using said temporary card number module, to a checkbook of a registered user, the checkbook located within said digital checkbook module, the temporary card numbers being sent by said system to a merchant, via the Internet, to pay for purchases made by the registered user when accessing a merchant website,

said central computer further configured to assign temporary shipping address codes using said temporary address codes module, to an account of a registered user, the temporary address codes being sent by said system to at least one of the carrier computer and the merchant, via the Internet, as shipping instructions for the package or packages.

29. A system according to Claim 28 wherein said temporary card number module is configured to:

access a card number database to select at least one inactive credit card number and at least one debit card number; and

access a customer history database to determine which card numbers to allocate for a session.

30. A system according to Claim 29 wherein to access a customer history database to determine which card numbers to allocate said temporary card number module configures said central computer to:

select a least actively used credit card number and debit card number;

determine if the selected card numbers are currently active for any other users; and

determine if the selected card numbers have been previously assigned to the user.

31. A system according to Claim 30 wherein said central computer is configured to deactivate debit and credit card numbers as soon as a time limit on a purchasing session has expired.

32. A system according to Claim 28 wherein said central computer further comprises a merchant database and pricing module configured to identify merchants which are partnered with the private and secure purchasing provider.

33. A system according to Claim 32 wherein said central computer system is configured to:

charge debit card rates for transactions to merchants who are partnered with the private and secure purchasing provider ; and

charge credit card rates for transactions to merchants who are not partnered with the private and secure purchasing provider.

34. A system according to Claim 28 wherein said central computer further comprises a user identification module configured with at least one of member numbers, user IDs and passwords, and recipient information for registered users.

35. A system according to Claim 34 wherein said central computer is configured to assign member numbers to users who register for an account and provide funding for an account.

36. A system according to Claim 28 wherein said central computer further comprises an account cross-referencing module configured to:

retrieve user account information and account balances from a customer database;

link the temporary card numbers received from said temporary card number module to user accounts; and

activate the card numbers.

37. A system according to Claim 36 wherein to activate the card numbers, said central computer system is configured to send instructions to activate the card numbers to the acquiring bank processor.

38. A system according to Claim 36 wherein said central computer system is configured to transmit an identification output file to a user computer, the output file comprising user account information, temporary card numbers, temporary shipping address codes, and final destination information.

39. A system according to Claim 28 wherein said central computer further comprises an omnibus accounting module configured to access a customer database to retrieve user account balances and transaction histories.

40. A system according to Claim 28 wherein said central computer is configured to allow a user who is registering with the private and secure purchasing provider to select an account funding option.

41. A system according to Claim 28 wherein said central computer is configured to facilitate returns of Internet purchases.

42. A system according to Claim 28 wherein said central computer is configured with a search page, which is configured to search one or more of selected Internet search engines and Internet directories to search for goods and services, based upon a single user entered search item.

43. A system according to Claim 42 wherein said central computer is configured to display search results for all selected search engines and Internet directories in a single page, a frame being displayed within the page with search results for each of the selected search engines and Internet directories.

44. A system according to Claim 28 wherein said central computer is configured with at least one of transaction histories and shipping histories for each user.

45. A system according to Claim 28 wherein said central computer is configured with a help screen, said help screen including headings for at least one of logging in, logging off, activating checkbook, transaction history, privacy options, shopping search and returns, the headings configured as hyperlinks out of said help screen.

46. A system according to Claim 28 wherein said temporary address codes module is configured to:

access a temporary shipping address code database to select at least one inactive temporary shipping address code; and

access a customer history database to determine which temporary shipping address codes to allocate for a shipping.

47. A system according to Claim 46 wherein to access a customer history database to determine which temporary shipping address codes to allocate, said temporary address code module configures said central computer to:

select a least actively used temporary shipping address code;

determine if the selected temporary shipping address code is currently active for any other users; and

determine if the selected temporary shipping address code has been previously assigned to the user.

48. A system according to Claim 28 wherein said central computer is configured with a scheduler to deactivate temporary shipping address codes once a pre-determined package delivery time limit has expired.

49. A system according to Claim 28 wherein said mail and shipping carrier database module is configured to identify shipping carriers which are partnered with the private and secure shipping provider.

50. A system according to Claim 28 wherein said central computer further comprises an account cross-referencing module configured to:

retrieve user account information and shipping categories from a customer database;

link the temporary shipping address codes received from said temporary address code module to user accounts; and

activate the user account for private shipping.

51. A computer programmed to:

couple to a user computer via at least one of an intranet and the Internet;

verify user entered member numbers and user IDs and passwords against an IDs and passwords database in a security module;

verify user account balances;

assign at least one temporary debit card number and at least one temporary credit card number to a user account for a purchasing session;

assign at least one temporary shipping address code to the user account for a purchasing session;

activate a user account, including card numbers and temporary shipping address codes for purchasing and shipping, respectively; and

transmit an identification output file to the user computer, the output file comprising user account information, card number information, and the temporary shipping address code.

52. A computer according to Claim 51 wherein to assign at least one temporary shipping address code to the user account, said computer is further programmed to allow a user to select a category name from a list of category names.

53. A computer according to Claim 52 wherein a category name includes an alias and a final destination for the alias.

54. A computer according to Claim 51 wherein to assign temporary card numbers, said computer is programmed to:

access a database of inactive card numbers;

select a least actively used credit card number and debit card number;

determine if the selected card numbers are currently active for any other users; and

determine if the selected numbers have been previously assigned to the user using a customer history database.

55. A computer according to Claim 51 wherein to assign temporary shipping address codes, said computer is programmed to:

access a database of inactive temporary shipping address codes;

select a least actively used temporary shipping address code;

determine if the selected temporary shipping address code is currently active for any other users; and

determine if the selected temporary shipping address code has been previously assigned to the user using a customer history database.

56. A computer according to Claim 55 programmed to provide final destination information for a package upon receipt of a query from a mail/shipping carrier computer.

57. A computer according to Claim 51 wherein to activate a user account for purchasing, said computer is programmed to transmit instructions to an acquiring bank processor to activate the card numbers.

58. A computer according to Claim 51 wherein to activate a user account, said computer is programmed to deactivate temporary shipping address codes after a time sufficient for receipt of any shipped packages has passed.

59. A method for facilitating private and secure purchasing and shipping of purchased items using the Internet, said method comprising:

accessing a secure purchasing and shipping system account;

funding the account;

activating the account for purchasing and shipping;

receiving temporary card numbers and expiration dates for the numbers that are assigned to the account;

receiving temporary address codes that are assigned to the account;

using the temporary card numbers to purchase items over the Internet;
and

using the temporary address codes to direct the shipping of the purchased items.

60. A method according to Claim 59 further comprising setting at least one of a transaction amount limit, a time limit for a purchasing session, and a package delivery time limit using the account.